Sexual Innuendo and Female Autonomy
in Early Modern Convents

by Donna DiGiuseppe

Convents in late medieval and early Renaissance Italy were de facto repositories of girls not destined for marriage. Some girls entered voluntarily to pursue personal religious conviction, but most entered convents at the insistence of family, typically for purposes of dynastic or financial preservation, concentrating dowry funds on the most successfully marriageable daughters and more promising sons.\(^1\) In other instances, parents sent their daughters to convents as expressions of their own religious conviction. Given the ubiquity of religious life for girls, convents captured by default a wide spectrum of personalities. As an institution, the convent made up a significant segment of the urban populace, and the sheer number of nuns made for a comprehensive cross section of the female population. That population reflected and responded to the cultural and social changes of the early Renaissance, the best that convent restrictions permitted. Convent culture itself transformed over time to reflect changing societal perceptions of nuns in relation to the outside world. Greater freedom in earlier centuries ceded to strict cloistering in the sixteenth century after the Council of Trent and analogous regional laws literally walled off nuns from their families and all social contact.\(^2\) This paper explores whether official censure was influenced by societal perceptions of nuns’ creative productivity within convent walls. While popular literature and moralists chose to emphasize the exceptional cases of sexual activity in convents by portraying women as deceitful and lustful, considerable positive creative activity was occurring within convents. This creativity was adversely affected by the clausura reforms designed to eliminate prohibited sexual activity.

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\(^1\) In the erotic satire I Ragiomenti or Dialogues, Pietro Aretino’s Nanna must decide the fate of her daughter—nun, whore, or wife—to which she is advised to “make her a nun. Just think, besides saving the three-fourths of her dowry, you’ll be adding another saint to the calendar.” Pietro Aretino, Dialogues, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Stein & Day, 1971), 16.

\(^2\) Convent life under clausura reforms of the sixteenth century can be contrasted with a relatively autonomous existence in the fifteenth century. For example, in the fifteenth century, individual convents frequently used their contacts with the outside world to solicit exceptional powers. In 1433, Simona di Giovanni di Panzano, abbess of the convent of Le Murate, sent delegates to Pope Eugenius IV, who extended relative autonomy to the convent by investing the abbess with full administrative authority to oversee her convent. BNF II 509, fols 10r and 13r-14r; cited in Kate Lowe, “Female Strategies for Success in a Male-Ordered World: The Benedictine Convent of Le Murate in Florence in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries,” in Studies in Church History: Papers Read at the 1989 Summer Meeting and the 1990 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society, Vol. 27, ed. by W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 215.
Popular literature of the period projected an image of sexually active nuns whose misbehavior was shielded by the seclusion of the convent. Nuns were simultaneously represented as naïve and sexually inexperienced, yet also as curious, rebellious and sexually rapacious. In his *Decameron*, Boccaccio tells the story of Masetto, a gardener who feigns dumb and enters a convent renowned for holiness under the pretext of begging for food but with an excited longing for the nuns. In a nod toward individual freedom, the narrator condemns societal expectations of convent celibacy by bemoaning those who fear the "diabolical evil" of sexually active nuns. Throughout the story, sexual freedom is prized. The nine nuns and Masetto work out a feasible share arrangement; offspring are discreetly raised within the convent, destined to become future nuns or monks; and Masetto retires happily to his village on a sizeable pension that would not normally have been available to a man of his peasant origins. However, the nuns are not just depicted as lustful, but also as indecisive, imprudent and shortsighted. They inconsistently supervised his work, dismissed breaking their vows as *pro forma*, and blatantly ignored the risks of pregnancy. This portrayal of the nuns mirrored a fear that, unchecked, the seclusion of the convent could provide an opportunity for misbehavior by women incapable of managing personal discretion. And yet this message was delivered in the context of apparent approbation of their sexual freedom. The story sent a strong, albeit mixed, message that while even the most pious nuns retained sexual desire, those who acted out those needs were untrustworthy.

In addition, the authority figure of the abbess is portrayed as manipulative yet slow-witted, even though she typically would have been highly educated. An abbess would have substantial responsibilities, and was arguably the only individually identifiable person within the convent. She was depicted on one hand as denying Masetto adequate compensation, instructing others to "[p]rovide him with a pair of shoes... wheedle him, pay him a few compliments"; and on the other, as easily deceived by his subterfuge, as the last to appreciate Masetto's ulterior value, and as slow to realize her subordinates' misconduct. Undermining a female authority figure is consistent with Boccaccio's treatment of strong women who exhibited authority and assertiveness

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4 Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 192.
5 Kate Lowe argues that only when being elevated to rank of abbess, with an elaborately celebrated election process, was an individual nun ever personally differentiated from the corporate body. Kate Lowe, “Elections of Abbesses and Notions of Identity in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Italy, with Special Reference to Venice,” in *Renaissance Quarterly 54*, (Summer 2001): 389-429.
6 Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 195.
rather than submission and modesty, a position reflecting conventional expectations for female behavior in the period.7

Francesco da Barberino told a similar tale of convent sexual lasciviousness in Reggimento e Costumi di Donne, yet to a less comedic end. Similar to Boccaccio’s tale, the sexual invader comes in subterfuge, although this time sent by Satan, with God’s permission, to test the virtue of the nuns.8 The nuns similarly reached a mutually beneficial arrangement to divide the intruder’s time so that all could be satisfied. Here, too, the abbess was the last to know, but equally willing. The nuns all become pregnant, the townspeople storm the convent and their relatives stone them.9 Barberino’s version condemned the nuns’ sexual behavior outright and served as a cautionary tale to warn that any nun who engaged in sexual activity was defying God. But her punishment would not just be meted out in heaven; rather she would be scorned by the larger community and abandoned and disciplined by her family as well. In contrast, Boccaccio’s version was not strictly a cautionary tale as its happy ending also provided entertainment value. Yet the condemnation, while subtler, was still evident in the unflattering characterizations of the nuns and the devaluation of the abbess. In both stories, the nuns had sex with men who entered the convent through their own initiative, who remained there through subterfuge and the seclusion of the convent. The common message between them was that convents provided both opportunity and cover for misbehavior, particularly sexual, and that women could not be trusted to exercise discretion within the isolated convents.

While these literary examples portrayed rampant sexual activity in convents as the norm, cases of sexual rebellion were actually the exception. The literature highlighted the stereotype of the devious and lustful nature of women. Women were generally defined as lustful, and sexual misconduct as women’s primary sin.10 Generally, the perception of

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7 In Famous Women, Boccaccio presented various stories of women and the influences of their respective accomplishments. One story was about Veturia, an ancient Roman matron who saved the city of Rome from attack by convincing her own warrior son to withdraw. “If Rome’s liberty had not been saved by her pleas, I would curse Veturia for the haughtiness that women have assumed as a result of her actions.” Instead of praising her persuasiveness and effectiveness, Boccaccio focused on the fact that she strayed from the ideal of modesty in addressing her warrior son. She was criticized for not conforming to the ideal even when contradicting it achieved the desired effect. Giovanni Boccaccio, Famous Women, trans. and ed. Virginia Brown (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 239.


9 “Traevi il popolo della contrada; entrano dentro per forza: trovarono le donne co’ corpi grandi. Mettono mano alle pietre e, così li lor parenti come li altri, le lapidarono.” Da Barberino, Reggimento, 137. See also Graciela S. Daichman, Wayward Nuns in Medieval Literature (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 108.

10 Ruth Karras has examined the legends behind medieval prostitute saints and reveals that out of a variety of moral imperfections, sexuality was woman’s sin. That’s moral imperfection was pride in her beauty which did not lead to jewelry theft; Mary the Egyptian’s desire to be free from parental control did not lead her to parricide; Afro’s paganidism did not lead to idolatry;
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rebelliousness could easily be massaged from stereotypes of women’s lustful nature, but regional differences also affected these perceptions. Preachers publicly likened the open convents of fifteenth-century Venice “not [to] monasteries but houses of prostitution and public brothels.” Venice at this time was most notable for documented, prosecuted illicit sexuality. Yet, it was one convent in particular, the belle of the noble convent, San Angelo di Contora, which garnered the infamy sufficient to tarnish all convents. In an eighty-year time span, this one convent witnessed over fifty prosecutions by secular authorities for illicit sex, vastly more than arose with any other convent in Venice, and this at a high point in Venetian libertine sexual acceptance. San Angelo was the convent of choice for noble families looking to place daughters in acceptable roles but without the ever-escalating dowry. So powerful were these families, that when the pope moved to shut the convent down, they successfully negotiated a compromise to ensure continued open access for their daughters. There were also demonstrated isolated cases of sexual activity based on admissions. The convent of San Zaccaria in Venice witnessed the admission of one nun, Laura Querini, who made a hole in the convent wall to admit her lover, and testified that, “I fell in love with him, and I induced him to love me. I used every means to make him love me.”

However, rather than supporting the depiction of the whoring sister-saint, this case perhaps better exemplifies the broken heart of a girl forced into a religious life that was not her calling.

Other opportunities for sexual scandal at convents involved the semi-public celebrations of Abbess elections. Two disparate yet notable instances, one at Santa Maria delle Vergini in 1430 and the other at Santa Maria Celeste in 1509, involved large groups of men who stormed the convents during abbess election festivities. In each instance, scandal evolved from the violation of the sanctity of the convent by male outsiders, reminiscent of both Boccaccio’s Massetto and Barberino’s Satan. The result of these violations was a perceived need to heighten

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11 Victoria Jane Primhak, “Women in Religious Communities: the Benedictine Convents in Venice” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1991), 248, citing D.M.S., I, col.836, December 25, 1497. Primhak notes that this Christmas day sermon was attended by the Doge and the Senate of Venice and was put in a context of blaming the nuns’ moral laxity for a plague outbreak.


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security within the convent rather than enforcing a code of behavior upon the male citizenry:

[all other fatigue and diligence is useless without caesura, I know that this would reduce the monasteries to obedience of Holy Worship, to honesty, and free these monasteries and this illustrious city, so zealous by nature, from so much infamy which has already reached the ears of foreign Princes.]

Ironically, these church and secular leaders viewed clausura as the means to give nuns greater freedom. However, this freedom was realized at the expense of their personal liberties.

Outside of these specifically documented cases evidence is often limited, anecdotal, and speculative, even while summarized as legendary. One study evaluating the known cases of sexual prosecutions concludes that there is scant evidence of sexual violations. Rather, the crimes consisted primarily of escaping the convent for family visits. Another study concurs that at times, this legendary immorality amounted to nothing other than a nun who snuck home to visit family members. It is important to distinguish between the perceived immoralities of a nun venturing outside of the convent because it violated the sanctity of the convent, from the sexual nature of the exceptional cases derived from a lustful stereotype of women.

The sexualized stereotype to which convent life was reduced also resulted in a misrepresentation of the positive creative production occurring in Renaissance convents. As will be explored later, considerable art was created by women in convents, even under conditions unfavorable to artistic growth. While this artistic production was wholly of a religious nature and utterly orthodox within counter-reformation Italy, sexualized stereotypes tainted the popular perception of this art. In his Dialogues, Aretino portrayed one mother's agonizing decision of whether to devote her daughter to a life as nun, whore, or wife. Aretino's ribald description portrays a girl who has entered the convent, saddened by the loss of her

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16 Victoria Jane Primhak “Women in Religious Communities,” 244 citing Guido Ruggiero, The Boundaries of Eros. Primhak concludes that “certainly this luxury and laxity associated with the conventual houses was not without foundation, even though detailed sources are difficult to find.”


18 Primhak cites the Patriarch of Venice who, in 1509 decried the “nuns who outside the convent wander through the city and in the homes of the laity, in Piazza San Marco and in other places, dressed in a secular manner to the great scandal of the whole city, infamy of the convents, and offence to the divine majesty.” Primhak “Women in Religious Communities” 248, citing Bibl. Correr, Cicogna 2583, May 23, 1509, f.14.

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family, and afraid that she was stepping into a grave of austerity and fasting. She found, on the contrary, a richly laden table and the company of “a troop of monks, friars, and a few laymen—the most handsome, well-groomed, gay young men I have ever laid eyes on.” Its walls were not covered with religious art, but rather with paintings, which would have made, “a hypocrite stop and stare.” Full of sexual overtones, the story describes one painting of St. Nafissa, the patron saint of whores, singing the song entitled “What is My Love Doing That He Does Not Come.” The next painting is of St. Nafissa satisfying the people of Israel, this time portrayed as a generous host taking her guests on a journey full of sexual innuendo. Another painting is of Boccaccio’s Masetto. In a story within a story, Aretino’s characters enjoy their recount of Boccaccio’s Masetto and a canonization of the convent inserted into the original story. Another painting portrays all the nuns of the order with their lovers and children. The final painting shows “all the various modes and avenues by which one can fuck and be fucked. In fact, before beginning their jousts with their partners, the nuns must try to assume the same positions in life as the nuns painted in the picture.” Aretino was himself the son of a reputedly beautiful courtesan who modeled for a number of sculptors and painters. While he was believed to have run away from home at the age of thirteen, his early years may have given him insight into how female prototypes constrained—or constructed—women’s opportunities for personal expression. The Dialogues perpetuate a perception that the art within convents reflected a lascivious, rather than pious, culture. Not only was the art of convents entirely pious in nature, its realism was crippled by lack of male figures to copy.

Whether the perceived need for convent reform was based on fact or fiction, convents did not escape the scrutiny of the Council of Trent which, in its twenty-fifth and final session, turned the eye of counter-reformation reforms toward the convents. The issues related to convents fell into three groups: the need for stricter moral discipline; forced professions for girls, in particular, but also widows; and the election of abbesses. The perceived need to restore discipline was evident in several ways. First, the council reiterated the need for strict observance of all religious rules and vows. Next, it articulated the need to reinforce cloistering, to “restore” the enclosure of nuns wherever violated, referencing another document, the constitution of Boniface VIII, which described the issue as periculoso. The Council called for both ecclesiastic censure and any necessary secular enforcement. No nun was permitted to leave the monastery without the express permission of the

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19 Aretino, Dialogues, 19.
20 Aretino, Dialogues, 22-24.
22 Schroeder, Council of Trent, 220.

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bishop. No outsider of any social or economic status was permitted to enter a monastery without the permission of a bishop or superior. Special note was made of the danger of convents located outside town walls, and their exposure to "rapacity" and crimes of evil men. One thinks of Masetto leaving his village to go to work for the nuns outside the town walls. In response, bishops were to move nuns to convents within cities. The enclosure of the convent was to be so strict that bishops presiding over abbess elections were to hear votes from a small grated window to the outside. Nuns were to attend monthly confession in order to strengthen their resolve against attacks by the devil, and to attend extraordinary confession two to three times a year with the bishop.

Perhaps acknowledging the cause and effect that forced cloistering had on moral conviction and the behavior of nuns, the council specifically addressed the forced profession of girls and dedicated a separate chapter forbidding forced profession of any woman. The practice of 'daughter dumping' in convents was to be safeguarded against by a bishop or his delegate, querying all girls seeking the habit, specifically to confirm that she understood and desired the calling. At the time of these pronouncements, the second half of the sixteenth century, Italy was experiencing dowry inflation, which made the less taxing dowry requirements of the church more appealing to the girls' families.

The final area of convent regulation that the Council of Trent addressed was the election of abbesses. To be elected abbess, one needed to meet certain age and experience requirements, forty years of age with eight years of experience, or if unobtainable, thirty years of age with five years of experience. In addition, abbesses were prohibited from overseeing more than one convent. Certain regional secular legislation also controlled the process of the abbess election. Venice established procedures to keep nuns from conferring together during the election and required male oversight of the election process. Two competing sentiments emerged. On one hand, distrust of nuns' discretion led to legislation requiring male oversight of the election process. On the other,


24 Schroeder, Council of Trent, 221.

25 Schroeder, Council of Trent, 228-229.

26 Schroeder, Council of Trent, 228.

27 Jutta Sperling has analyzed patrician dowries of sixteenth-century Venice compared to the annual income of a skilled artisan: tens of thousands of ducats compared to approximately fifty ducats. Jutta Sperling, Convents and the Body Politic in late Renaissance Venice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 34.

28 Schroeder, Council of Trent, 222.


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TOTAL seclusion of nuns was valued highly enough to necessitate the use of a grate to distance the nuns from their overseers. Both effectively limited the autonomy of the body of nuns by restricting their self-determination within the convent power structure.

Secular authorities also regulated the freedom of nuns. Venice restricted the autonomy of convents by legislating clausura well before the Council of Trent. In 1514 the highest legislative body in Venice, the Council of Ten, enacted a law requiring perpetual seclusion, although with various exception for close family members. Florence began legislating convent restrictions over a century before the Council of Trent. In 1435, the Officials of the Curfew and Convents declared that God afflicted the world with war, disease, and calamity as a direct response to nuns’ sexual misconduct. They further declared that the physical enclosure and isolated nature of the convent, including complete prohibition for any outsider to enter, was necessary for the nuns to serve God with their virginity. While the sexual misdeeds of nuns was assigned direct responsibility for God’s wrath, the document blamed men for transforming nuns, “from virtue into dishonor, from chastity into luxury, and from modesty into shame...”

“Liberty” would be the reward for the strictly encloistered nuns. In contrast to the calamities directly attributed to nuns’ perceived sexual misconduct, the penalty for a priest who regularly violated the cloister was a six month jail sentence and a thirty florin fine to be distributed to the poor. In another case, a layperson, described as a youth from Narni, was penalized with public flogging through the streets of Florence and imprisonment until he could pay a fine of five hundred lire or the amputation of his left foot if he could not.

In a case reminiscent of Masetto’s garden, Michele di Piero Mangioni, a mason who did occasional work for a convent, was described as having multiple relationships at the convent, some, apparently coercive, with Mangioni “seizing” nuns, and once purportedly, “incited to lust by that nun.” Michele did his penance by walking a penitential procession on the feast day St. John the Baptist and by making a “peace agreement” with the abbess and nuns of the convent, presumably not modeled after the agreement Masetto negotiated. The nuns in these cases were most likely issued internal discipline or penances, as the secular cases do not mention any recourse to the nuns. Another case involved a reformed prostitute turned nun, who portrayed her pimp as having daily access to the convent

31 ASF, Guidice degli Appelli, 79, part 2, fols. 68r-69r, cited in Brucker, 207. Given lack of access to unpublished documents in Italian archives, this paper relies on secondary sources as primary sources for archival documents.
and repeated opportunities for coerced sex with the nuns. Apparently feeling cheated of his investment, the pimp sought, and was awarded, fifteen florins from his former prostitute and was banished from Florence for three years. The inconsistent penalties issued in these cases may stem from the thirty-year time span from which they were derived. However, the lack of consistency more likely belies the ad hoc nature of the proceedings due to their exceptional nature, contrary to the prevailing perception that the misconduct was a regular occurrence.

While the spectrum of the female population living in convents led to instances of sexual activity on which church and commentators fixated, it also led to a significant output of creative work. Some evidence of female artistic production has been obscured because nuns shied away from signing their work, and consequently, some pieces may never be accurately attributed. But convent art also suffered from the same reluctant social acceptance that woman artists received in the secular world. As Vasari put it, “[n]or have they been too proud to set themselves with their little hands, so tender and so white...braving the roughness of marble and the unkindly chisels....” However, there remains evidence of considerable artistic production by nuns relative to the limited female art produced in general. One compilation of sixteenth-century Italian women artists identifies thirty-nine artists total, of which fourteen are designated “Suor.” One of these fourteen entries refers to multiple artists from the convent of San Vicenzoio Prado. While such numbers do not compete with the production of male Renaissance artists, they arguably reflect a more ambitious spirit, given prejudices against women’s artistic productivity.

One notable artist nun from the fifteenth century was Saint Catherine Vigri. Born to a noble family of Ferrara, Saint Catherine founded and served as abbess of Corpus Domini in Bologna. In addition to painting, she wrote, and was written about—another nun, Suor Illuminata, wrote her biography. Not only was Catherine of Vigri’s work entirely devotional in nature, she argued that Jesus was the most proper subject matter for art, as opposed to ornamental “flowers and branches.” Her convent was also prolific in book production, including publishing editions of her Le Sette Armi Spirituali.

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33 ASF, Giudice degli Appelli, 80, fols. 151r-152r, June 2, 1439, cited in Brucker, Society of Renaissance Florence, 211.
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Vasari’s *Vite* mentions Suor Plautilla Nelli, a nun and Priorress of the Convent of Santa Caterina da Siena in Florence. Contrary to Aretino’s portrayal of convent art as lascivious, the work produced at Santa Caterina was entirely religious in nature. Vasari described her as one of many women in history who rose above the tedium of domestic work for which he considered all women to be ideally suited. He identified various celebrated pieces by Plautilla: two panels in the Church of the Convent of Santa Caterina, particularly her Magi Adoring Jesus; choir panels in the Convent of S. Lucia in Pistoia; a Last Supper in the refectory of the Convent of Santa Caterina; pieces at San Giovannino and at Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence; and altar pieces and a large panel in the Hospital of Lelmo. He also noted her many pieces owned privately, which he felt too numerous to detail. Vasari recognized the traditional importance of studying under and imitating great masters in training artists, and acknowledged Plautilla’s limited training opportunities in relation to her male contemporaries. He identified Plautilla’s technical skill at representing female facial features as much more realistic than her representation of male figures and attributed this difference to her insufficient exposure to men. He contrasted her skills to that of Sofonisba Anguissola, who earned her place as a resident artist on the court of Phillip II of Spain on the one hand as a “miracle,” but on the other, as a result of Sofonisba’s opportunity to copy the works of masters to perfect her technical skill. This contrast implied that Sofonisba had more personal, and therefore professional, freedom outside the convent than did Plautilla within it. It further implied that Plautilla’s artistic creativity within the convent was crippled by her lack of exposure to men. Even though popular literature advanced the notion of the lascivious nun, in reality, the nun artist was disadvantaged by a lack of male models. Vasari was not alone in recognizing the tangible effect of limited training opportunity for women artists, particularly for cloistered nuns. Fra Serafino Razzi, a sixteenth-century Dominican Friar and historian, profusely praised Plautilla’s skill particularly given her lack of training opportunities.

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In the absence of traditional training opportunities, or even live male figures to copy, cloistered nuns learned from each other. The convent of Santa Caterina in Florence, and Suor Plautilla Nelli in particular, attracted a following and the convent has long been noted for its creative work. Razzi named three nuns of Santa Caterina as disciples of Plautilla, Suor Prudentia Cambi, Suor Agata Trabalesi, Suor Maria Ruggieri, and three others as additional producers: Suor Veronica, Suor Dionisia Niccolini, and his sister Suor Maria Angelica Razzi. Other sixteenth-century convents known for artistic production included San Vincenzo of Prato, San Domenico in Lucca, and San Giorgio in Lucca. Manuscript illuminators include fifteenth-century Suor Angela dei Rucellai and sixteenth-century Suor Lucrezia di Francesco Panciatichi.

The Convent of Santa Caterina was devoted to the martyrdom of the Dominican moralist preacher Savonarola. Savonarola's influence on the creative autonomy of nuns was checkered, however, he certainly inspired the work of Suor Nelli and influenced one nun's composition of laude. One of the more significant pieces attributed to Suor Nelli depicts Savonarola asking the Madonna to intercede on behalf of Florence. Yet, these pieces were produced in the later half of the sixteenth century, several generations after his 1496 execution, which was certainly enough time for his reputation to be rehabilitated by his devotees. However, Savonarola was generally acknowledged for his attack on decadent Florentine culture under Medici rule. In 1495 he fiercely sermonized against the art of Le Murate in Florence, one of the more prosperous convents of his era. In that sermon, Savonarola drew a direct connection between Le Murate's art and sin, associating their art and their music with scandal, vanity, Satan, and openness to men. He imputed sexual...


Turrill, "Compagnie and Discopoli," 85.

Included in the Appendix. This painting, which remains at the convent of San Domenico in Fiesole, is attributed to Suor Nelli by Catherine Turrill, but Andrea Muzzi attributes it to Zanobi Poggini. Turrill, "Compagnie and Discopoli," 123.

Le Murate produced exceptional embroidery, gold and silver Agnus Dei, plaster sculpture and manuscripts. Its abbettes were adept at fundraising by giving these items to famous patrons such as the queen of Portugal. ASF, CRS 81, 100, 241r, April 15, 1501; ASF, CRS 81,100, 212r, September 24, 1508, ASF, CRS 81,100, 324r, ASF, CRS 81, 100, 198r as cited in Kate Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 265.

"Io ve lo dico, perché voi vi scandalizzate...che fanno d'oro e d'argente, e loro libriccini; secondo, se sono murate, debbono stare come hanno il nome. E dico che questa e una cosa pesassima ad aprire ai signori che vi vadino. Io so ancora io chi sono e cortigiani, che sono come una galla leggeri e ho detto loro che quello canto figurato l'ha trovato Satannasso e che le gettino vi questi libri di canti e organi...Così dico delle altre monache, che tutte bishogna che

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innuendo to their work when he denounced their little gloves and linens trimmed with gold with a reference to Signori in their bedrooms, but it has also been argued that Savonarola was not opposed to religious art. He used woodcuts in the pamphlets he designed to compliment his sermons.\textsuperscript{50} Some scholars believe that Savonarola introduced the practice of painting to the Dominican Convent of Santa Caterina in Pistoia.\textsuperscript{51} How can we explain the disparity between Savonarola’s criticism of the art of the nuns of Le Murate and his alleged encouragement of art at Santa Caterina in Pistoia? Savonarola simply may have been politically motivated because the Medici supported Le Murate and he garnered much of his influence by filling a power void left after the Medici expulsion from Florence in 1494.\textsuperscript{52} Alternatively, perhaps it was not the art of Le Murate, but rather their self-made success and their artistic autonomy that instigated his suspicions.\textsuperscript{53} Perhaps it was not Savonarola, but rather his convent devotes themselves, fully immersed in the art culture of the Italian Renaissance, who inspired their own art.

A connection between the independent spirit of art-producing convents like Santa Caterina and the perceived need to strictly enclose them and truncate their independence may be seen in their vocal dissent from enclosure dictates and the response their dissent provoked. The prioress of Santa Caterina documented her convent’s dissent from clausura. In her “Ricordi e Memorie Attenenti al Monastero di S. Caterina,” she describes her parlay with a Reverend Father Alessandro Riuccini in which she argued that the convent’s rules and constitution excused them from clausura requirements. She protested that they did not want to live that way.\textsuperscript{54} In response, he called her “arrogant,”\textsuperscript{55} an aptly
donna di Giuseppe


\textsuperscript{51} Andrea Muzzi, “The Formation of Plautilla Nelli ‘dipintora’: Artistic ‘Dilettantismo’ and Savonarola’s Ideas in the Convent,” in Nelson, Suor Plautilla Nelli (1523-1588), 33. She states in a footnote that, “according to Savonarolan tradition, the preacher had introduced the practice of painting into the convent.”


\textsuperscript{53} Unsual pieces from the Convent of Le Murate, housed today in the library of Major J.R. Abbey, are included as number (5) and (6) in the Appendix; J.R.A. 6991, f. 83v (Florence: 1510) and J.A. 6991, f. 129v-30 (Florence, 1510) both reproduced in J.J.G. Alexander and A.C. de la Mare, ed., The Italian Manuscripts in the Library of Major J.R. Abbey (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), plates F and LXXV.

\textsuperscript{54} “Noi non siamo in clausura ma abbiamo la nostra Regola et costituzione confermate da papa Paulo 3 le quale non ci obbligano a clausura; non l’abbiamo et non la vuolgliamo.” A.S.F., C.R.S., 106, reprinted in Nelson, Suor Plautilla Nelli (1523-1588), Appendix II.
telling adjective reflecting the expectation that a woman, moreover a nun, should submit and accept restrictions imposed from above. Her willingness to record this volley and insult reflect that what Riuccini viewed as arrogance, the Prioress saw as a positive assertion of legitimately acquired rights. It may also have reflected the independent streak that fueled the creative spirit of the convent. The nuns may also have protected their degree of freedom for the sake of economic survival. Some convents were increasingly impoverished by the effects of clausura, both from reduced donations from family and from eliminated opportunities for outside earning, primarily begging. Even so, as late as 1617, more than a quarter of a century after the Council of Trent, the convent of Santa Caterina was still cataloguing works of art and their values on the open market. Yet, incomes had diminished, ranging from five scudi for “La Testa della Madonna con le Mani” to twenty-five denari for a “Magi ne Angeli.” Account books show much higher earnings at Santa Caterina before the clausura effects took hold. Suor Nelli’s highest earning year, 1562, yielded 282 lire and totaled 890 lire over a five-year period.

Examples of nuns’ creative work can be found not only in painted art but also in original music, particularly in Savonarolan laude. One preserved piece was composed by Santa Caterina de’ Ricci, a nun who joined the convent of San Vincenzo in Florence in 1536. A diarist’s account tells of her deathbed visions of Savonarola in 1540 that lifted her to recovery and inspired her composition. Her lyrics were entirely devotional and consistent with other laude written by, or in honor of, Savonarola. However, a collection of laude texts published in Venice and dedicated to her included an introductory note by the printer stating that nuns’ singing of laude in convents had devolved into shocking, innuendo filled songs. While it is curious how a Venetian printer would know what lyrics the nuns of Tuscany were singing in their convents, it is likely that he was projecting his expectations onto them consistent with the sexual innuendo frequently attached to nuns’ artistic production.

55 “Allora detto Reverendo veschovo venne in tale furia che si rivolse alla priora et gli disse che era superba arrogante altiera et gli darebbe il castigo che meritava.” A.S.F., C.R.S., 106, reprinted in Nelson, Suor Plautilla Nelli (1523-1588), Appendix II.
57 A.S.F., CRSGF 106, n. 80, filza 3, reprinted in Nelson, Suor Plautilla Nelli (1523-1588), Appendix II.
58 Caroline Murphy, “Plautilla Nelli, Between Cloister and Client: A Study in Negotiation,” in Nelson, Suor Plautilla Nelli (1523-1588), 60. Twelve denari equaled one soldo and twenty soldi equaled one Lira. [Florins were used for international commerce.]
60 Libro Primo delle Laudi Spirituali (Venice: Giunti, 1563) cited in Macey, “Infiamma il mio Cor.” in Monson, Crannied Wall, 194.

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Nuns’ music was specifically targeted by post-Tridentine reformers and did not escape the clausura effort to wall off nuns from any public contact. In later periods, Bolognese nuns were banned from singing in organ lofts in order to keep them out of view. They responded diligently, by recording “[h]ow on December 22, 1584 our organ was removed from its place facing the outer church, by order from Rome applicable to all the convents of Bologna. And, as a sign of obedience, we sisters had it removed and had the spot solidly walled up, to the entire satisfaction of our illustrious Archbishop Paleotti.” This proclamation stands as a too obvious example of how convent creativity was targeted by the church in its effort to limit nuns’ personal freedom. Yet, it would be further infused with a perception of scandalous behavior. A decade later, this same Paleotti would associate traditional solemn music with scandal, “because in our city it is the practice for the nuns to perform such sorts of solemn music, which are the cause of many scandalous disorders, as we experience daily, therefore I would ask your excellency...to prohibit solemn music.” Given that Paleotti admitted the traditional practice and solemn content of the music, it is hard to imagine to what scandal he is referring. One can only surmise that the daily scandal was the fact that the music reached the ears of outside listeners, thereby violating clausura and the sanctity of the convent. It is in examples such as this that one can see how benign, even pious, behavior of nuns was contorted into an image of misbehavior, perpetuating stereotypes of women as lascivious. Even music for mere entertainment was cast as profane to the outside world. One visitor reported that “[s]ometimes the nuns sing profane songs, and they play the guitar and the lute, and they dress up as men in order to put on plays... It is ordered that they should not wear secular clothes when they perform plays.” One scholar views this as an example of the type of freedom that clausura provided for creative expression, as if nuns isolated from the world escaped scrutiny. However, that this particular instance was both reported and resulted in an order proscribing their performance, argues to the contrary. Their creative efforts were both scrutinized and curtailed because it was believed that their creativity was infused with innuendo even when they performed only for each other.

While a causal connection between Renaissance nuns’ art and cloistering cannot be strictly proven, a connection was frequently evident among female autonomy in convent art production, the sexual innuendo that often colored the positive creative work, and church and secular suppression of nuns’ personal freedom. Convent art is a critical factor in

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Laven, Virgins of Venice, 140.

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the question of whether women had a Renaissance. It is evident that convent women were affected by the importance of art in Italian Renaissance society given the considerable amount and variety of art produced. Yet it was produced within a narrowly permissible range. Nuns’ work was subjected to the cultural limitations placed on women generally and then repeatedly infused with sexual innuendo, when, in reality, convents were not even producing humanist, secular art, let alone work of lascivious nature. The art produced in convents was consistently of orthodox, religious subject matter, wholly undeserving of the images of Aretino or the sermons of Savonarola. What little freedom nuns had for personal or creative expression in earlier centuries was not curtailed because of the exceptional cases of misbehavior, but because cultural prejudices against women were projected onto their creative output.

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